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ABSTRACT

Basic skill performance levels of third-, fifth-, seventh-, and tenth-grade students attending schools in the Appalachian School Districts of Kentucky are reported and discussed. School district scores on the reading, language and mathematics subtests of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills clearly show that children in most Appalachian school districts in the state perform significantly worse than children in non-Appalachian districts. Explaining why education is poorer in the mountains than in other parts of the country seems much more problematic now than would have been the case in the 1960s. It has been argued that poor performance in mountain schools stems from genetic deficiencies, cultural deprivation, local poverty conditions, or a combination of the three. Alternate explanatory models emerging in educational theory, i.e., the critical theory and status group competition models, view poor school performance in the Appalachian region as functional to capitalist social structure or as functional to the boundary maintenance and control needs of professional (or political) educators, respectively. These conflict models appear to be at least as plausible as previous culture of poverty explanations. It is hoped that the data presented in this paper will encourage further research on educational performance in Appalachia and open up discussion of who benefits and who loses when mountain children fall behind children in other parts of the country. (Author/RH)

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ASSESSING BASIC SKILL PERFORMANCE IN APPALACHIAN KENTUCKY

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American society has seen continuing arguments over the form, processes and scope of formal schooling. Should its primary function be to teach only the most talented or to give equal opportunity to all? Should teaching and learning be accomplished in one room schools, in large consolidated institutions, or via satellite? Should children attend school for several years while quite young, should their education extend through adolescence, or should life-long learning be the norm?

Systematically related to arguments over who should go to school, where should teaching be done, and for how long are arguments about the goals of formal schooling. Should schools exist primarily to help children adjust to society, learn how to learn, develop their creative potential, or develop specific vocational skills?

At the national level, the goals, processes and scope of formal education have increasingly been seen as meeting the needs of a meritocratic society. The structure of a society like ours, according to several proponents, depends upon the cultivation and utilization of talented individuals in technical and hierarchical levels. In order for such a system to work, those who have talents sought after by leaders of science and industry must be identified, trained, and recruited into leading positions in the technological and service sectors. Such a process benefits society as a whole because it allows the most gifted persons to enter positions which are concerned in effectively solving economic and social problems. Consequently, because meritorious individuals provide essential leadership and skills to the society at large, they should

be rewarded proportionately to the merit they bring to their positions.

Under this model, public education provides many of the functions which allow such a social system to operate. In addition to providing common "moral education" public schools operate to identify and sort individuals according to their talent. They also train students based upon their abilities, and reward them differentially depending upon how they do (or do not) master basic learning objectives. Public schools serve other institutions (educational and/or occupational) by identifying the "merit" of each individual whom they have socialized.[1]

To be sure, proponents of the meritocratic model recognize the inefficiency and waste of talent which poverty and "culturally disadvantaged" backgrounds frequently impose on minority group populations. Thus, many liberal programs of the last two decades were sponsored by social leaders convinced that providing a few more equalizing life chances for disadvantaged individuals would dissipate the ascriptive forces which kept delaying a truly efficient meritocracy.

Unfortunately, the supposedly illogical and inefficient learning difficulties of "disadvantaged" students tend to persist in the larger society even with massive federal spending to equalize educational opportunity. Several prominent researchers seeking school related variables which could equalize life chances for school age children concluded that little could be done through conventional school practice to compensate for the effects of disadvantaged starting points and/or social class background.[2] Such persistent difficulties in equalizing educational opportunities have led to several alternative explanations about the relationship between education and social structure and to new arguments about the goals of public schooling.

Schools and Appalachia

In Appalachia, theories about the interrelationship between formal schooling and social structure have become intensified. A region of 18 million people, Appalachia is a diverse "country within a country" which bisects America's most urbanized, industrialized regions. But Appalachia itself is underdeveloped, and as in many parts of the world, this underdevelopment offers startling contrasts. Here, immense wealth resides side by side with abject poverty, and successes and failures are brought into full relief. Economically dependent on slow-growth or declining industry, and characterized by a paucity of tertiary enterprise, Appalachia has been plagued by high unemployment and underemployment. The region has traditionally exported surplus laborers to urban areas of the north, where they have entered low-skill and low paying occupations. The children of these migrants, although not unintelligent, have been shown to be ill-prepared to cope with urban schooling.[3] This has led many critics to charge that Appalachia has been neglecting the needs of its children, and that Appalachian school systems and those who operate them are to blame.

It was perhaps inevitable that Appalachian schools should come under scrutiny, especially since poverty was "rediscovered" in Appalachia during the period when liberal reformers thought schools could combat unequal opportunity in general.[4] Here in this region, social critics found on a broad scale the extreme inequities and excesses which only existed in isolated pockets elsewhere. Critiques both from within and outside Appalachia offered explanations for Appalachian schools which ranged from conventional-liberal platitudes to neo-Marxist rhetoric.

Unfortunately, the two things recent critics and erstwhile reformers of Appalachian schools have shared is the lack of consensus about educational goals for mountain children and a data base from which to assess their difficulties and strengths. Recently we have begun to see debates among Appalachian educators about whether or not mountain schools could or should adopt mainstream goals and processes for such a unique part of the country.[5] Should schools in the mountains neglect and try to stamp out language, aspiration and value differences evidenced among Appalachian children? Should the education of a student in Harlan be identical to the education of a student in St. Louis? Should students come to value geographical mobility, executive positions in large corporations, and a split foyer house in the suburbs after exposure to public schooling? Or, should Appalachian schools emphasize mountain customs, traditional kinship patterns, local orientation, old-time music and more intimate personal relationships between neighbors and friends than is possible in the large middle class society outside of Appalachia? Should Appalachian schools deny the validity of the indigenous cultural backgrounds many mountain children bring with them to the learning place, or should these schools seek to build bridges between minority and majority cultures for those who desire to cross?

Whether or not Appalachian schools should continually model themselves after mainstream schools or whether more emphasis on local values and heritage should be attended to, there seems little argument that mountain children must obtain competency in basic skills like their counterparts in other regions of America. Without such skills there would be little chance for mountain children either to move toward the mainstream should they so desire, or to take advantage of diversification in employment emerging in numerous

locations in Appalachia. While the debate has begun about the goals of Appalachian schools, there still is little in the educational literature which suggests how well such schools fare compared even to non-Appalachian schools within mountain states. Branscome, in responding to negative stereotypes about educational quality in the mountains, concluded that "...rather than simply accepting largely unsubstantiated claims about the nature, degree, and scope of the students' academic deficiencies, we need to re-examine these assumptions...."[6]

Recently, comprehensive tests of basic skills have become mandated by most Appalachian states so that at last the public can examine the performance record of local schools. With such data available, researchers may finally begin to investigate actual student attainment in Appalachia.

Basic Skill Performance in Kentucky: How Appalachian School Districts Fare

The data for our investigation of basic skill performance in Kentucky came from records of student performance on the McGraw-Hill "Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills" battery which is administered annually to third, fifth, seventh, and tenth graders in that state. Data utilized in this study came from test records for the 1978-79 school year. The results of these tests were summarized by the State Board of Education, which publishes a district by district profile of student achievement in each test category. The six basic skills areas which these standardized instruments purport to gauge are reading, language, mathematics, reference skills, science, and social studies. Profiles presented herein, however, include only data from the reading, language and mathematics subtests.

The state profiles of exam results are compiled in the form of percentages of students in each district who score above and below the average range on each test, as well as the percentage of those who are average. Thus, school districts within the state can be compared with each other based on national norms. A "Below Average Range" percentage for a given district signifies the percentage of students who fall in the bottom three stanines on a particular subtest compared with the national population. The percentage of students who score in the "Above Average Range" category for each district actually signifies that percentage of students in a given school district who scored in the seventh, eighth and ninth stanines based on national norms. Nationally, 23% of the students these tests were normed on fell in the below average range, 23% fell in the above average range, and 64% in the average range. Thus, an average school district should have approximately 64% of students performing in the average range and 23% scoring in both above average and below average categories.

For purposes of this analysis, school districts were ranked according to the percentage of students who fell into the categories of Below Average Range and Above Average Range. While the use of such categories makes discussion of individual performance differences problematic, we were interested in whether or not total district pupil performance data would show significant differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian districts.

Figure 1 About Here

Figure 1 graphically demonstrates the differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian school district scores on the reading subtest of the Compre-

hensive Test of Basic Skills. All four grade levels of each school district in Kentucky are individually represented in this figure. Thus the profile shown here actually represents four times the total number of school districts reporting basic skill tests in 1979. The vertical axis in the figure represents a progressively higher percentage of students who score in the Above Average Range within each district and grade level. The horizontal axis in this figure shows a progressively greater percentage of students who score in the Below Average Range within each district and grade level. Thus, the symbols within Figure 1 represent relative concentrations of school districts having students who score in the below average range and the above average range on the reading subtest across all four grade levels.[7] As the figure shows, the school districts having the higher percentages of below average readers tend to come from Appalachia. In fact, even though Appalachian school districts are far less numerous in Kentucky than non-Appalachian ones, Appalachian school districts far outnumber non-Appalachian districts in the higher end of the below average test score distribution of the reading subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills. Across all four grade levels, over half of the Appalachian district scores fall above the 23rd percentile in the below average category, and the ten district scores showing the highest percentages of students in the below average category were all Appalachian.

Analysis of school districts reporting high percentages of above average readers suggests a similar although not as dramatic a finding. Of all the district scores with greater than 23% in the Below Average Range, only one has greater than 23% scoring in the Above Average Range. Fewer then 18% of all Appalachian school district scores fell above the twenty-third percentile of the above average category, and only two of the top ten scores came from

Appalachian districts. School districts having over twenty-three percent of their students scoring in the above average range are underrepresented in Appalachia compared to non-Appalachian districts.

In addition to plotting this relative distribution profile for descriptive purposes, we also performed Kruskal Wallis H tests for two independent samples separately for each grade level. The Kruskal Wallis test provides a test of significance for ranked observations on a nominal (classificatory) scale.[8] Such a test was necessitated because average range scores released by the state were inappropriate for more conventional comparisons without variability-within-districts data. The researchers ranked all school districts by grade level based on percentages of students scoring in the above average range and the below average range. The comparison of Appalachian to non-Appalachian districts showed that as a group, Appalachian schools have significantly more students than predicted scoring in the below average range, and significantly fewer than predicted in the above average range. Significance levels for comparisons on this non-parametric chi-square approximation test exceeded $p < .001$ at all four grade levels.

Figure 2 displays approximate Appalachian and non-Appalachian school district scores for below average range and above average range on the language subtest of the CTBS. As in the previous figure,

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Figure 2 About Here

Appalachian school districts seem overrepresented by high percentages of students in the below average range, with few districts rating high in the above

average category. Even though Appalachian districts are far fewer in number, well over half of school districts reporting more than twenty-three percent of their students scoring below average in language are Appalachian. Appalachian school districts do a little better in the above average range category, as almost a third of the school districts reporting greater than twenty-three percent of their students scoring above average are Appalachian.

As in the case of reading scores, Appalachian and non-Appalachian school districts were again ranked on percentages of students scoring in the above average range and below average range for each grade level. Also, as before, all eight Kruskal Wallis tests showed significant differences between Appalachian and non-Appalachian district scores. Appalachian districts had significantly more students scoring in the below average range on the language subtest and significantly fewer students scoring in the above average range. Again, significance levels for all eight tests exceeded $p < .001$.

Figure 3 About Here

Figure 3 displays similar discrepancies between Appalachian and non-Appalachian districts on the mathematics subtest of the CTBS. Almost half of all below average Appalachian district scores are over twenty-three percent. At the same time, only one of the many districts with greater than 23% of its students scoring in the below average category has a similar percentage scoring higher than 23% in the above average category. In the above average category the profile does suggest a slightly better showing among some Appalachian districts, but still suggests they don't equal non-Appalachian districts even in Kentucky. The Kruskal Wallis H test again revealed

significant differences. Appalachian school districts were significantly over-represented among schools with high percentages of students below average in mathematics, and they were also underrepresented among districts with higher percentages of above average range scores. Significance levels for all eight independent tests esceeded $p < .001$.

Discussion

From this analysis it seems clear that as a group Appalachian schools in the state of Kentucky contain significantly fewer above average students and significantly more below average students on tests of basic skills. Data presented here confirm the contentions of many regional observers; that education in the mountains is in worse condition than in other parts of the country, at least in the areas of basic skill development. Explaining why this phenomenon exists, however, seems much more problematic now than would have been the case in the sixties.

Until recently, data like the above would suggest to most educational observers that genetic deficiencies or culturally disadvantaged home environments would explain underachievement in Appalachian schools. As mentioned before, however, several different explanations for poor school performance in economically depressed areas have emerged which don't "blame the victims" for their poor achievement. While the data collected and presented in this paper do not allow us to test different models for explaining school achievement, we feel it is imperative to lay out these arguments in order to open up the discussion about who might be responsible for the apparent inequality in Appalachian educational attainment. We also feel the models will serve to orient questions about the larger role of education and social structure.

A Subculture of Poverty

During the past two decades a "cultural and spiritual malaise" approach has been adapted by many social commentators to explain the incidence of poverty in Appalachia. Practicing a kind of "aggregate psychology," these writers have borrowed from Oscar Lewis' thesis that the poor are poor because they are poverty-stricken. In Lewis' schema, a "culture of poverty" has somehow come into existence, and its values and norms are passed from generation to generation through socialization. This socialization is psychologically impoverished, leaving its recipients "unready" to accommodate themselves to changing conditions in such a way as to take advantage of opportunities for improvement.[9]

The notion of a coherent atavistic value structure which is in apposition to the value structure of modern industrial society has guided discussions of Appalachia by sociologists and social redeemers alike. Although the value dimensions emphasized by these authors vary somewhat, the main themes are drawn from Ford's variables of individualism, traditionalism, fatalism, and religious fundamentalism. Ford, although he sees the region's people as much more progressive minded than earlier writers, submits the possibility of a "frontier" culture whose vestiges are adapted by the poor to counter risks of future disappointments and shattered hopes.[10] On the other end of the continuum, Ball postulates an "analgesic subculture" of institutionalized non-rational responses to frustration.[11] In either case, the result is that a picture is drawn of an Appalachian subculture which is somehow unique, more or less hermetically sealed, and in which the major obstacles to development are the people themselves.

Viewing poor educational performance from this perspective usually takes one or more well repeated themes. Many of the children in mountain schools,

it is claimed, have little access to appropriate learning environments prior to school enrollment and thus begin at a disadvantage when they come to school. Disadvantaged entry coupled with traditional home and community values makes a more conventional (middle class) education extremely difficult. Thus, poorer student performance in rural Appalachia is to be expected until regional child-rearing practices change and expenditures by state and federal agencies increase to help offset the poor cultural antecedents and reinforcers for schooling.

Education and Critical Theory

A rather pervasive and comprehensive critical view of causes for poor school performance in Appalachia comes from several leftist social theories. It has become de rigueur for critical theorists to impute goals to the educational system that are antithetical to publically expressed ideals of merit and maximized potential. For these authors, what is taught is much less significant than the manner in which it is taught: the "hidden curriculum."[12] Regardless of content, what is really imparted is an ideological posture that is reflective of an elite domination. Children are inculcated by petty rewards and punishments that prepare them to accept success and failure as defined and meted out by the larger society. In short, instead of helping to make the world a better place to live in, schools are turning out a product which is designed to perpetuate the inequitable and elite dominated social system that now exists.

Because unskilled and semi-skilled labor are the primary requirements of mountain industries, the main function of the schools in these regions is to produce a labor force consistent with the local structure of opportunities.[13] Should schools be successful in graduating large numbers of students and

sending the cream of Appalachian youth off to eastern and northern colleges, who would be left to cut trees, work in the mines and staff the textile mills?

Under such a view, the primary function of education is to "cool out" the professional career expectations seen as consistent with exceptional school performance. Schools must provide a poor education for the majority of mountain children and simultaneously convince those children and their parents that such failure is due to personal inadequacy, rather than the school or its surrounding social structure. Children who can be made docile and obedient enough to finish high school or technical school are to be rewarded by obtaining the few semi-skilled occupational positions which exist, while the underachievers and dropouts can join the capitalist reserve army and collect local unemployment or migrate for unskilled jobs in midwestern cities until their labor is needed in Appalachia.

Status Group Competition: Educators as an Interest Group

Yet another perspective for explaining poorer school performance in Appalachia can be found in recent writings from both national and regional authors. Nationally, several prominent writers have begun to decry the power and control of professional educators in dictating what learning is, and how poor school performance should be corrected.

Professional educators have increasingly cut off non-traditional learning opportunities unless they have fallen under their administration.[14] Similarly, the common socialization educators obtain have convinced them that an educated person is one who has undergone the schooling process, which logically should be under the control of professional educators.[15] Also, in order for educators

to maintain and/or extend their power and control over the shrinking percentage of school age children, educational problems must continue to exist. Thus, poor school performance is actually a boon to educators inasmuch as such "problems" give them an excellent opportunity to expand programs and employ additional personnel.[16] As school systems become increasingly centralized, a major aim of some educators is protection of their own positions and the exercise of increasing monopoly control over education. Thus, an ideology of authoritarian control permeates the administration of public schools, and "learning" becomes of secondary concern to boundary maintenance. In systems where the community does not hold school personnel accountable, it is easy to adopt the attitude that "schools are for teachers."

The substantial political power of school administrators in Appalachia has also been suggested by several regional authors as an important factor in educational issues. At times, the school superintendent has used the schools as a power base for local politics, influencing school board elections, dispensing patronage jobs in the system, and using federal and state monies to affect a congruence between the school system and county government.[17] Plunkett found in a multi-county study that educational personnel most able to affect educational change were also those most satisfied with local school performance.[18] Most high school principals in this survey were found to be closely tied with local politics, and expressed reluctance in seeking input to assistance from "outsiders."

Perhaps one reason for the seemingly greater autonomy of schools in Appalachia then elsewhere is the apparent lack of strong community level social organization in the mountains. Research by Wardell, et. al. in a coal mining community in southwestern Virginia, for instance, indicated a paucity of

voluntary associations and low membership and participation in those that existed.[19] Although expressing dissatisfaction with many aspects of local government and the operation of schools, the respondents felt they lacked the ability to mobilize their resources in order to take effective action.

Thus it might be argued that Appalachian schools contain a unique mix of professional educators also exercising political power in a relative power vacuum. Protecting and enlarging the schools' influence in the community may be more easily accomplished in Appalachia because the major school administrators have such important political power. Neither professional nor political social systems would welcome extended discussions of poor school performance in the region, nor increased calls for accountability such as are heard in other parts of the country.

Summary

Heretofore most discussions of educational problems in Appalachia have taken the form of curricular critique and/or depressing vignettes of insensitive teachers in typical mountain schools. Subsequent discussions of how to improve educational opportunities have usually focused on how to improve curricular materials or upon how to make teachers more sympathetic to cultural differences (or deficiencies) among Appalachian children. In this paper we have attempted to broaden both the knowledge base from which to assess educational problems in Appalachia and to suggest alternative models for viewing educational problems in the region.

School district scores on Kentucky's Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills clearly show that children in most Appalachian school districts in the state perform significantly more poorly than children in non-Appalachian districts.

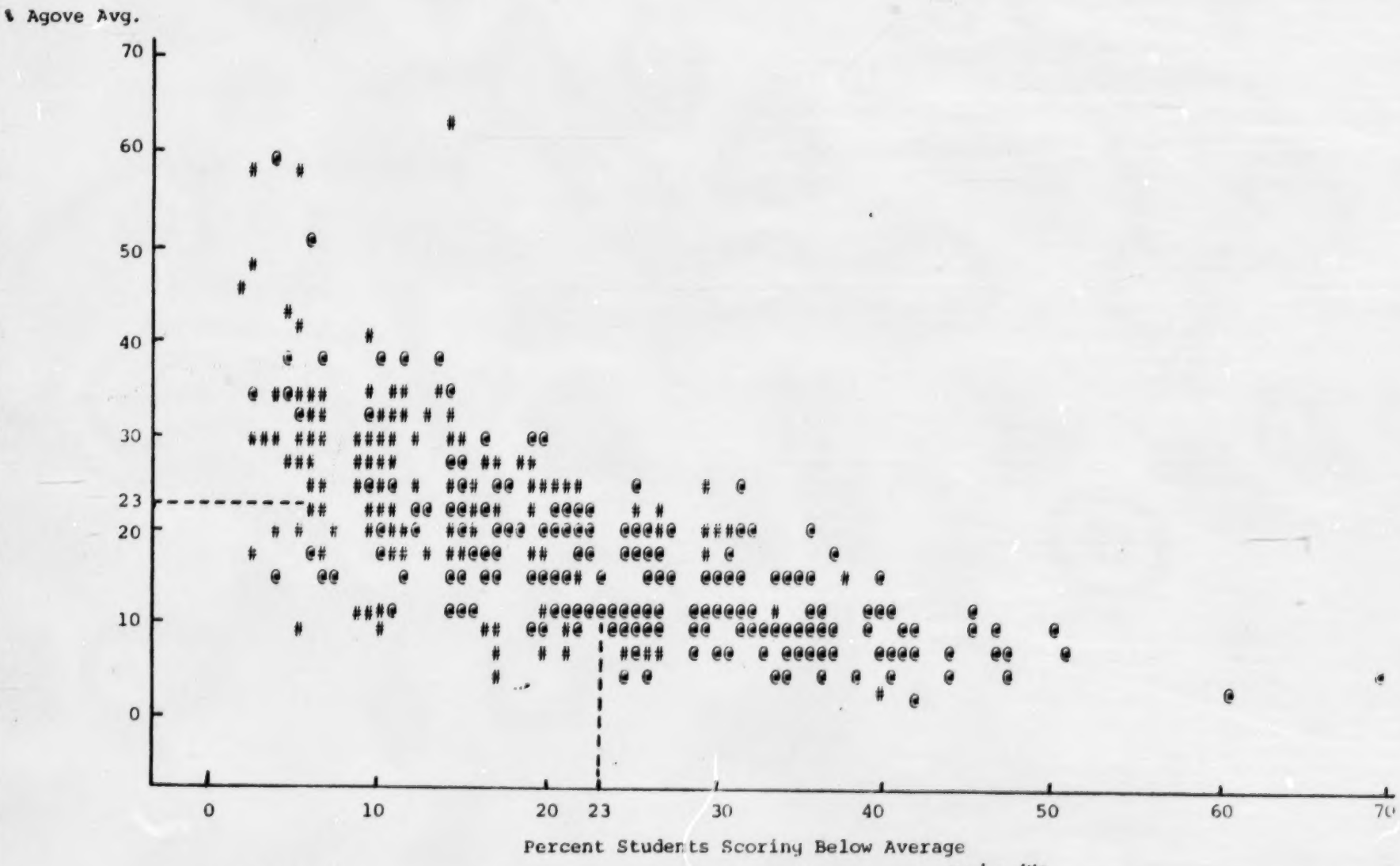
This poorer performance is found in all areas of tests utilized, although data presented here only cover reading, language and mathematics skill areas.

Typically it has been argued that poor performance in mountain schools stem either from genetic deficiencies, cultural deprivation, local poverty conditions, or a combination of the three. While there is no way at present to determine to what extent such factors are associated with impaired academic skill development in school, there are at least two other explanatory models emerging in educational theory which view poor school performance in the region not as a serious liability, at least for school personnel. Rather, the critical theory and status group competition models view poor school performance in the Appalachian region either as functional to capitalist social structure in Appalachia or as functional to the boundary maintenance and control needs of professional (or political) educators. We are not able, using current data to test how much either of the latter conflict models explains educational conditions in Appalachia, but we do suspect each of them is at least as plausible as previous culture of poverty explanations have been.

In addition to the renewed discussions about educational objectives in Appalachia, we believe more comprehensive discussions about the nature of school control should gain attention in the region. We hope that the data presented herein will not only spur further research on educational performance in Appalachia but will open up further discussion of who benefits and who loses when mountain children fall behind those in other parts of the country. The debate in Appalachia about whether or not mountain children should be encouraged to aspire to mainstream "meritocratic" ideals seems somewhat academic at this point. If performance on tests of basic skills for Appalachian children do not markedly improve in the future, Appalachians will

have no choice in whether they should join the mainstream or not.

FIGURE 1: Appalachian and non-Appalachian school district scores for above average range and below average range--reading subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills*



@ Appalachian school districts

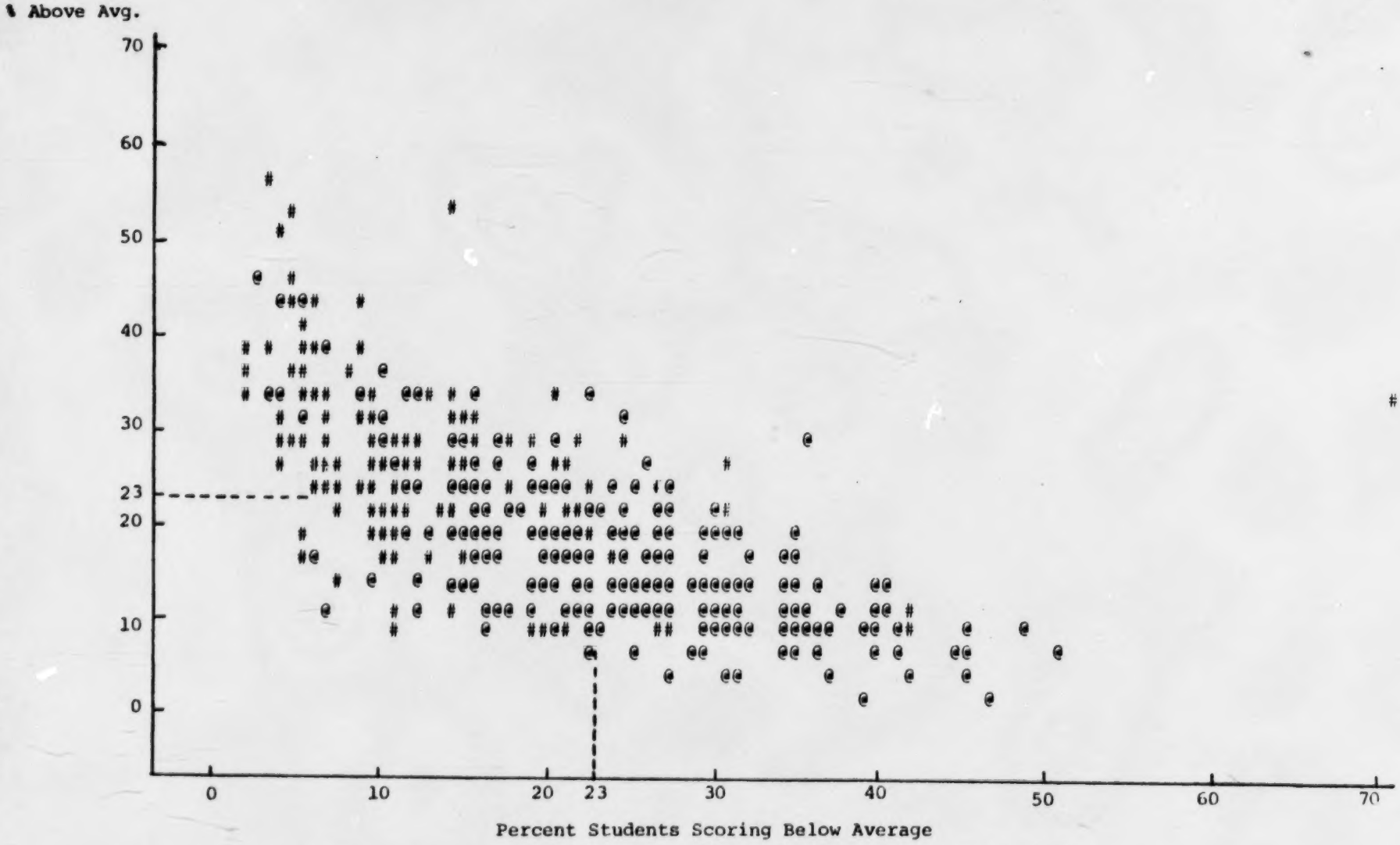
Non-Appalachian school districts

* Observations = ~~1124~~ 724 (~~642~~ 442 hidden)

Kruskall-Wallis $p < .001$ for each grade level

Note: This computer plot represents relative concentrations of the contour variable.

FIGURE 2: Appalachian and non-Appalachian school district scores for above average range and below average range--language subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills*



@ Appalachian school districts

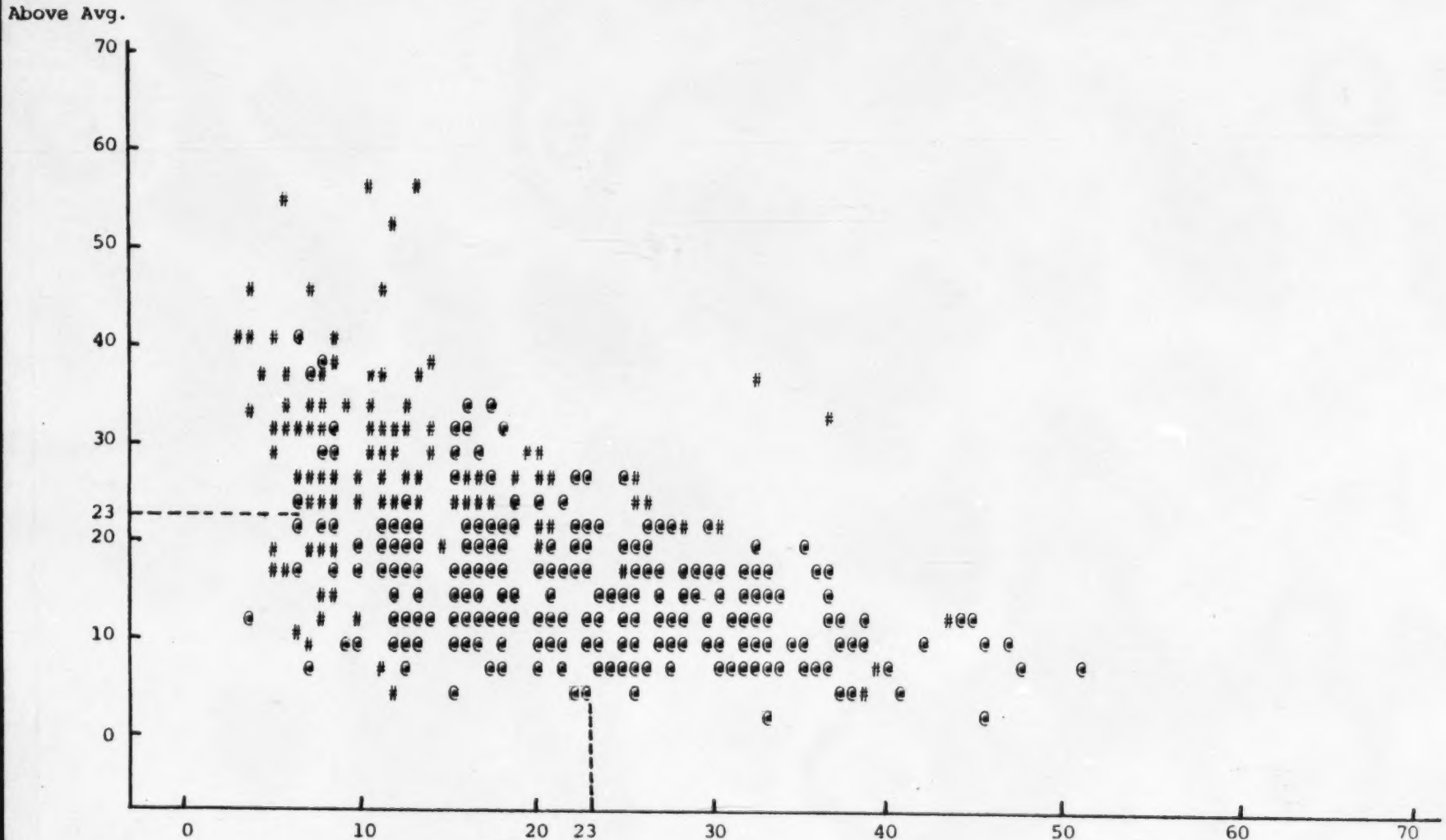
Non-Appalachian school districts

* Observations = ~~1124~~ 724 (~~845~~ 445 hidden)

Kruskall-Wallis $p < .001$ for each grade level

Note: This computer plot represents relative concentrations of the contour variable.

FIGURE 3: Appalachian and non-Appalachian school district scores for above average range and below average range--mathematics subtest of the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills*



@ Appalachian school districts

Non-Appalachian school districts

* Observations = ~~1124~~ 724 (~~631~~ 431 hidden)

Kruskall-Wallis $p < .001$ for each grade level

Note: This computer plot represents relative concentrations of the contour variable.

NOTES

1. Daniel Bell. The Coming of Post Industrial Society. (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

2. For example, see Christopher Jencks, et. al., Inequality (New York: Basic Books, 1972).

3. For a discussion of educational issues for urban Appalachians see Thomas Wagner's, "A Study of Selected Appalachian Migrant Students Attending Urban Junior High Schools in the Cincinnati, Ohio Area." (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1973).

4. See, for example, the "subculture of poverty" model applied to Appalachia in Jack Wellers Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).

5. See, for example, Jim Wayne Miller's discussion in "Appalachian Education: A Critique and Suggestions for Reform," Appalachian Journal 5 (Autumn, 1977) 13-22.

6. James Branscome, "Educating Appalachia's Poor" in Appalachia: Social Context Past and Present. Bruce Ergood and Bruce Kuhre, eds. (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1976).

7. These computer profiles have been generated by a program from the Statistical Analysis System (SAS). The contour plot shown here is meant only as a two dimensional visual representation of a three dimensional distribution. For example, the total number of observations used to generate this profile number 1124. Due to tied ranks, however, 842 observations are hidden. In the case of tied ranks, the profile represents the tied rank with the most representative symbol.

8. Joseph Hill and August Kerber. Models, Methods and Analytical Procedures in Educational Research (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967).

9. Oscar Lewis, The Children of Sanchez (New York: Random House, 1961).

10. Thomas R. Ford, "The Passing of Provincialism," in The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1962).

11. Richard Ball, "Poverty Case: The Analgesic Subculture of the Southern Appalachians," American Sociological Review, 33(1969) 885-895.

12. Martin Carnoy, Schooling in a Corporate Society (New York: McKay, 1975).

13. James Branscome, "A Colonial System of Education," Mountain Life and Work (January, 1971) 15.

14. Ivan Illich, Deschooling Society (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

15. See discussion of this theme in Christopher Hurn, The Limits and Possibilities of Schooling (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1978).

16. See this theme developed in Daniel Moynihan, "Equalizing Education: In Whose Benefit?" The Public Interest 29(Fall 1972), 69-89.

17. Mike Winerip, "When You're Talking Schools or Politics in Menifee County, You're Talking George Alice Motley," The Louisville Courier-Journal and Times (June 5, 1977).

18. See Plunkett and Bowman, Elites and Change (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1973).

19. Mark Wardell, David Smith and Charles Vaught, "Coal Mines and Coal Mining in Southwestern Virginia," Blacksburg Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station [unpublished manuscript, 1979].